Ford & Harrington Horse Importing Firm

By: Dale C. Maley
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Before the introduction of farm tractors in the 1920s, every farmer needed strong and powerful horses to plow and plant his fields. In every agricultural area, men established horse-trading businesses to provide farmers with the animals they needed. Often, large draft horses were imported from Europe and sold to Fairbury area farmers.

Fairbury had two primary horse dealers. The first was John Virgin (1838-1900). John was a Civil War veteran who settled in Fairbury after the war. He imported Percheron draft horses from France and then sold them to Fairbury area farmers. He designed and built the unique "Horse Palace" stable, which was just north of Walton's Department Store. John was well known nationally and was President of the National French Draft Horse Association. The Governor of Illinois appointed him to set up the agricultural exhibit at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. In today's dollars, John Virgin sold about $1 million worth of Percheron horses annually.

The second primary horse dealer in Fairbury was the firm of Ford & Harrington. At their peak, they sold 400 to 500 horses annually at an average price of $2,000. In today's dollars, the annual sales of Ford & Harrington were $25.9 million.

James E. Harrington was born in 1829 near the city of Westport in County Mayo, Ireland. In that era, potatoes were the primary food crop grown in Ireland. In 1845, a blight disease wiped out all the potato crops.

James E. Harrington, at the age of 20, decided to escape from the famine and emigrate to America. His ocean voyage in 1849 from Ireland to Mobile, Alabama, took eight weeks. After reaching Mobile, he left by riverboat for Cincinnati, Ohio. James worked in Ohio as a farmhand for eight years. In 1853, James Harrington married Bridget McGreal. They left Ohio in a covered wagon and traveled for 17 days until they reached what is now Fairbury. They made their covered wagon trip just a couple of months before the new Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. James and his brother Edward Harrington farmed land they rented southwest of Fairbury. In 1860, James Harrington purchased a 40-acre farm in Indian Grove Township. In 1888, James Harrington retired from farming and moved to Fairbury. James and Bridget Harrington had six children.

One of the sons of James and Bridget Harrington was Austin Harrington (1865-1949). Austin was born on a farm southeast of Fairbury. He attended the Beulah country school near his farm. Austin farmed until about 1898, when he moved to a new house he had built in Fairbury. Austin joined the draft horse importing firm of O'Brien & Harrington. In 1905, Austin married Miss Minnie Gerisch of Chenoa.

Frank Ford was born in Somersetshire, England, in 1850. He was the son of William H. Ford and Harriett Norman. William H. Ford, who lived and died in his native land, was a farmer and a breeder of draft horses and was an excellent judge of Shires, the draft horses of England.

Frank Ford first saw the light of day on his father's farm. His boyhood and youth were spent in school and his father's barns and fields. Under his father's instruction, Frank became one of the best judges of horses in all that region. In 1868, when eighteen years old, he came to Ravenswood, Canada, where he gave his attention to farming. In 1870 he came to Odell, Livingston County, and engaged with Therin Wooley, breeders of draft horses, and was connected with their business until 1872.

May 20, 1873, Frank married Miss Lucy Richardson, born in Flintshire, England, in 1845. About the time of his marriage, he bought forty acres of farmland near Odell. In 1878 rented 320 acres in that vicinity, on which he began breeding and raising Percheron and Shire horses.

Frank remained in that location until 1881. He had so much success that he bought 160 acres in the southeast quarter of Odell Township. On that site, Frank erected fine barns and other buildings for the breeding and care of horses. He purchased the finest Percherons, Belgians, and Shires, both stallions and mares, buying from such importers as James D. Beckett, of Chicago; D. H. Vandolah, of Lexington, Ill.; the Dillon Brothers, of Normal, Ill.; and Dunham, Coleman & Fletcher, of Wayne, Ill.

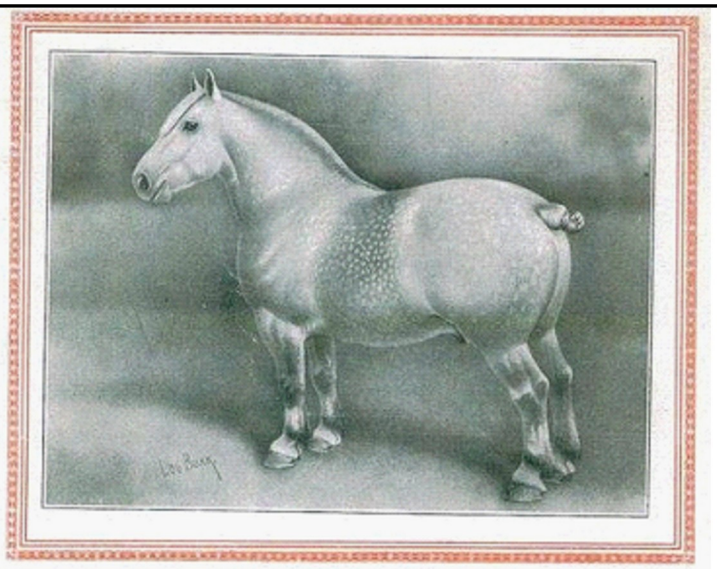
In 1893, Mr. Ford left the farm and moved to Fairbury to begin his labors there as a buyer for the firm of O'Brien & Devine. This firm was a dealer in big draft horses, which they shipped to the largest horse markets in the United States and England. His connection as buyer and salesman with this concern terminated in 1897, when Mr. John F. O'Brien died. Mr. O'Brien was married to Mary F. Harrington, a sister of Austin Harrington.

After the death of Mr. O'Brien, Frank Ford formed a partnership with Austin Harrington under the firm name of Ford & Harrington. They continued buying and selling market horses and sold for the largest importers of Percheron, Belgian, Shires, and Hackneys horses. In 1906, Ford & Harrington began importing horses, stallions, and mares directly from European breeders. In 1907, the firm expanded by opening horse barns in Parker, South Dakota, and Pueblo, Colorado. The South Dakota barn was managed by George A. Ford, a son of Frank Ford.

Ford & Harrington developed a national reputation as importers of high-quality European horses. By 1909, they were selling 400 to 500 horses annually at a price range from $500 to $3,500 per horse. The firm began issuing annual catalogs with horses for sale. They hired the famous artist Lou Burk to draw illustrations of each horse offered for sale in the catalog.

The advent of the farm tractor and the automobile was the death knell of the horse importing business. All that remains today of this hugely successful horse importing firm

is one of their advertising calendars and one of their annual catalogs with Mr. Burk's beautiful illustrations of the horses they sold.

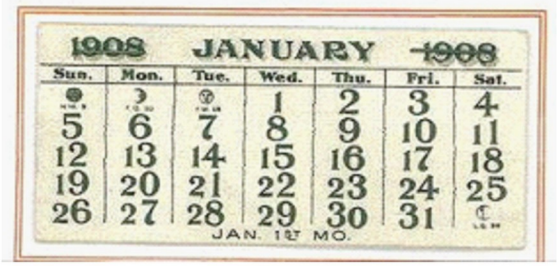


FORD & HARRINGTON

Importers of Percheron, Belgian, Shire and Hackney Stallions and Mares

FAIRBURY, - - - ILLINOIS

BRANCH BARN
Parker, S. D.
The First and Only Importing Barn in South Dakota



BRANCH BARN

Pueblo, Col.